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ABSTRACT

Character education's single-minded focus on virtues and moral exemplars is apt to leave young people wondering what an individual does to be honest or courageous or generous or determined. Kohlberg's well-known levels of moral development do not involve the application of universal principles until the most mature stages. Some discussion of moral theory, including an exploration on moral principles, could augment character education efforts. This paper discusses three interactive learning models an educator uses to help develop the moral reasoning skills of elementary and middle school students. The paper explains that the educator concentrates on three different interactive exercises: (1) a Prisoner's Dilemma-type game to teach the value of cooperation; (2) a character modeling game that explores the meaning of fairness; and (3) a scenario exploration exercise using different moral theories to help students see how theoretical moral principles can be applied to figure out the right thing to do. Each exercise is described in detail. The paper concludes that these games and exercises enable students to generate the principles by themselves, from the inside-out, and in so doing, they achieve a familiarity and dexterity with them that otherwise would be unattainable. (BT)

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Teaching Ethics from the Inside-Out: Some Strategies for Developing Moral Reasoning Skills in Middle-School Students

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Teaching Ethics from the Inside-Out

Character education, for all its many strengths, is subject to the same sorts of objections that are typically raised to any virtue ethics theory in the Aristotelian tradition. Principally, these objections center around the failure of a virtue ethics model to provide clear principles for determining what our moral requirements are in particular situations. The Aristotelian approach emphasizes what sort of persons we ought to be as opposed to what sort of actions we ought to perform. This is fine insofar as it provides models of excellent human behavior; however, it leaves us scratching our heads in determining how we ourselves can achieve that sort of excellence.

In character education terms, it is obviously quite valuable that young people become acquainted with virtues such as generosity, courage, honesty, and determination. And it is clearly beneficial that they learn about paragons of virtue such as as Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, Rosa Parks, and Abraham Lincoln as examples toward whom to aspire. But character education's single-minded focus on virtues and moral exemplars is apt to leave young people wondering what one actually does to be honest or courageous or generous or determined. When faced with a moral choice how does one decide what the virtuous action really is?

Philosophers have historically attempted to answer that question by the application of moral theory. Normative ethical theories such as utilitarianism or Kantian deontology purport to provide principles that enable us to decide what we ought to do in particular situations. Thus, for example, as a Utilitarian, I exhibit virtue when my choices maximize total utility—when they create the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Or, if I'm a Kantian, I behave virtuously when I choose to treat human beings as ends-in-themselves rather than solely as means to something else.

The application of such principles is, however, notoriously difficult. And it is especially challenging for young people who are just learning about morality. Kohlberg's well-known levels of moral development don't involve the application of universal principles until the most mature stages. One of the presumed strengths of character education, after all, is that children find it

readily accessible. It seems far more manageable for a third-grader, for instance, to emulate the behavior of a moral exemplar than to apply the Categorical Imperative.

Given the aforementioned objections to a virtue theory approach to moral development and reasoning, though, it would seem that some discussion of moral theory—including an exploration of moral principles—could augment character education efforts. The challenge is to make such discussion and exploration accessible to students whose moral reasoning abilities are only beginning to be developed.

I believe this challenge can be met through the use of interactive learning models—essentially games and exercises—that get students thinking about ethics and ethical principles from the "inside out." In my experience working mostly with middle school students—but also with children as young and kindergarten and as old as high school—I have found that if the students themselves are placed in activities that give them opportunity to generate the principles themselves, those principles are relatively easy to understand and apply.

In this paper, then, I discuss three such I use to help develop the moral reasoning skills of elementary and middle school students. I concentrate on three different interactive exercises. These are:

1) A Prisoner's Dilemma-type game to teach the value of cooperation.
2) A character modeling game that explores the meaning of fairness.
3) A scenario exploration exercise using different moral theories to help students see how theoretical moral principles can be applied in order to figure out the right thing to do.

Each of these exercises is ostensibly quite simple, but their effects can be quite compelling. Students typically come away from each of them with a newfound understanding of how they can make more compassionate, more cooperative, and more thoughtful choices in their lives.

Explanations of each of the three exercises follow:

The Prisoner's Dilemma Game

Many contemporary philosophers, arguing in a broadly Hobbesian tradition, consider the purpose of ethical constraints on people's behavior to be in support of self-interest. We ought, for

example, to be honest and fair because—in the long run—honesty and fairness enables us to get more of what we want out of life.

To illustrate this idea, a so-called "Prisoner's Dilemma" model is often used. In the Prisoner's Dilemma scenario, we see that straightforwardly acting in one's rational self-interest leads to an outcome that is less desirable for everyone involved. Ethical constraints on one's behavior—constraints that emphasize cooperation over competition—enable agents in a Prisoner's Dilemma to solve the dilemma in such a way that maximizes overall benefits for all parties involved.

This exercise is intended to demonstrate that principle in an an interactive, engaging, and usually somewhat surpising way.

I begin by breaking the class into two teams of equal size. The teams line up facing each other. The player at the head of each line is given a card that is red on one side and green on the other. I explain to the students that each person in line will have a chance to compete against his or her counterpart in the opposing team's line. Players will stand back to back and show to me—standing in front of them—either the red side or the green side of the card . They will be awarded points depending upon the side of the card they show and the side their opponent shows. (I use the standard Prisoner's Dilemma matrix to award them.) Here's what I say:

- *If you show green and your opponent shows green, you each get 3 points.*
- *If you show green and your opponent shows red, you get 1 point, your opponent gets 4 points.*
- *If you show red and your opponent shows green, you get 4 points, your opponent gets 1 point.*
- *If you both show red, you each get 2 points.*

I then give the students one very simple goal for the game:

- *The goal of this game is for both teams to score as many points as possible.*

I make it a point to say no more than that. I then point out that this game is played with no talking whatsoever. The game then starts.

In the first round, players tend to try a variety of strategies, sometimes showing red, sometimes green. As the round goes on, though, it becomes apparent to team members that it behooves them to not show green; it is always (as is the case in collective action problems like this) in their self-interested benefit to show red. Red dominates green in this game theoretic matrix. By the end of the round, therefore, most players are showing red, and if they don't their teammates usually moan.

At the end of the first round, I tally up the teams' scores. I then remind students of the goal of the game and give them one minute to talk with their own team members to strategize for a second round. After doing so, I again prohibit them from talking and the second round begins.

The results are fairly predictable. All players show red, and as a result, their scores, both as individual teams and as a group, tend to be lower than round one. (Here, they are averaging 2 points per interaction, whereas in round 1, since sometimes they scored 1 or 4, their average is usually closer to 2.5)

I demonstrate to students they are actually doing worse the more they play. How, I ask them can they maximize their scores? Here, I remind them again of the goal of the game: *for both teams to score as many points as possible.*

I now give teams one minute to strategize not only with their own team members but with members of the opposing team. At the end of this, talk is again stopped and we play a third round.

Generally, in this round, all players show green. Teams average 3 points per interaction and players see how their team does better by cooperating with the other team.

We then debrief the game in two ways. First, we discuss situations in "real-life" that have this sort of dynamic. Usually, students bring up all sorts of classic collective action problems: adherence to pollution control standards, limits on fishing, high-occupancy vehicle lanes, refraining from cheating on tests. We talk about how individuals and group in such collective action problems can work together to maximize their collective benefit.

I then ask students to perform a brief writing project that answers two questions:

- What did you learn in this game?
- How can you use it in your life?

Students take five minutes or so and write down their answers. They then each have the option of reporting their answer to their classmates. Most do, and their answers tend to be quite moving, as they explain ways in which they can do better by cooperating with others in the future.

I have played this game with fourth graders, fifth graders, and sixth graders. While the discussion in the debrief tends to be more or less sophisticated, it's my experience that the "aha" that students get about the value of cooperation is equally powerful at all of these levels. A very clear principle emerges from the game and discussion: by cooperating, we are more likely to get what we want than by single-mindedly pursuing our limited self-interest. This principle represents a strong underlying foundation upon which to build further ethical understanding as well as a workable principle to apply in choosing between alternatives in real-life.

"Hand-Dealt"—A character modeling game

The contemporary philosopher John Rawls is famous for exploring the relationship between justice and fairness. In his seminal *A Theory of Justice,* Rawls argues that the guiding principles of justice are those that free and rational persons concerned to further their own interests would accept in an initial position of equality.[1] The choice which rational people would make in this hypothetical situation of equal liberty, determines, for Rawls, the principles of justice. A key concept in Rawls account of justice as fairness is that—when choosing these principles—no one know what his or her place in society is. Agents choose the principles of justice behind a "veil of ignorance" that ensure that no one is prejudicially favored in the distribution of natural assets or social benefits. Presumably, fairness—and thus, justice—is guaranteed by this arrangment.

In this exercise, I try to recreate the Rawlsian model through an exploration of the question, "Is Life Fair?"

To begin, students are dealt cards that assign them a job, a relationship, and a living situation. They might be, for example, a married couple with 3 children, with one parent being a janitor and

[1]Rawls, John, *A Theory of Justice,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p.11.

the other a sales clerk, living in a two-bedroom apartment. Once students have their identities assigned, we go around the room discussing whether life is fair. (Usually the students who have good jobs and houses say "yes;" the others say "no.")

A number of societal benefits are then offered. These benefits include job training, new housing, educational subsidies, even a lottery win. We then strategize ways to allocate social benefits in ways that would be most fair. Students develop a list of principles for allocating these benefits. Some typical alternatives include by merit, by need, by random, or by people with blond hair. In general, there is spirited discussion about the best way to allocate benefits; and in general, students find it difficult to reach a consensus since—for the most part—they are trying to figure out ways that the benefits will accrue to them.

They are then asked to set aside everything they know about about their character. They must forget that, for example, they are married schoolteachers making $30,000 dollars a year or single homeless persons living on welfare. Behind this "veil of ignorance" then, what turns out to be the fairest, most just way to allocate benefits?

The character of the discussion changes radically. No longer are students solely focused on what they can get. Rather, they are interested in designing and selecting principles that allocate social benefits in a far more just and equitable way. The principles that emerge from this discussion can then be applied in their own lives—in the classroom, on the playground, and with their families and friends. As a consequence of this exercise, students develop a more sophisticated understanding and appreciation for the relationship between justice and fairness, as well as an increased ability to apply the principles of justice for themselves.

Scenario Exploration Exercise

In this exercise, students are introduced to "the moral spectrum"—seven different perspectives on the right thing to do, seven different questions to ask themselves to determine whether a particular course of action is right or wrong. These questions are drawn from the dominant moral theories in Western philosophy over the past 2500 years or so. They are presented, however, in a form that is quite accessible; the focus is on questions to ask rather than

principles to follow. The questions explore issues of liberty, duty, compassion, community, happiness, virtue, and self. They thus mirror the central concerns of, respectively, existentialism, Kantian deontology, an ethic of caring, Humean communitarianism, utilitarianism, Aristotelian virtue theory, and ethical egoism.

We refer to these questions as different "moral prisms" to emphasize their function as different perspectives on the right thing to do, perspectives that, together, form what can be called a "moral spectrum." The the prisms and their questions are as follows:

- The Existentialist prism asks: *"What course(s) of action will set people most free?"*
- The Deontological prism asks: "What *would I do if everyone in the world were to do as I did?"*
- The Ethic of Caring prism asks: *"What course(s) of action will best sustain and nurture a caring relationship between myself and others?"*
- The Communitarian prism asks: *"How would I act if everyone in my community knew exactly what I were doing?"*
- The Utilitarian prism asks: "What *course(s) of action will best maximize total happiness in the world?"*
- The Virtue Ethics prism asks: *"What would the most virtuous person I know of do in this situation?"*
- The Egoist prism asks: *"What course(s) of action will most effectively ensure that my short- and long-term goals are reached?"*

I explain that way to use the moral spectrum model is, in keeping with the many-hued theme, as a palette. When considering a moral issue, most of us tend to paint with a limited number of colors. Using the moral spectrum model enables us to expand our palette and see different perspectives that we can then bring to the issue. For instance, if we generally gaze through the Deontological prism, we're apt to be focused less on results than on outcomes, which may lead us to making choices that underplay their effect on people's happiness. It may be worth our while, therefore, to gaze through the Utilitarian prism and see if our judgment of what we ought to do

changes. Considering the issue from this new point of view won't necessarily change our mind, but it will bring new options to the table. In short, I propose that the moral spectrum model enables us to expand our moral perception and with any luck, choose more wisely.

Students are then given a variety of moral dilemmas to work with. For example, they might be asked the following:

"You are spending the afternoon with a friend of yours who isn't very popular. You run into a group of your friends who invite you to go to a movie but they say that your unpopular friend can't come. What is the right thing to do?"

Asking different questions about this scenario may yield different judgments. For instance, an existentialist, focused on liberty, may say that a person ought to do whatever maximizes freedom in this situation—probably leaving the friend behind. But other perspectives—notably utilitarianism, an ethic of caring, and communitarianism—would, for different reasons, judge that the right thng to do would be to stay with the unpopular friend.

In any case exploring scenarious like this from different moral perspectives enables students to flex their moral reasoning abilities in surprising ways.

When the exercise works well, students come to see that bringing a wide variety of perspectives to bear on an issue tends to result in choices that are more sophisticated and ultimately, better for all parties involved.

Conclusion

The upshot of all three of these exercises (and others like it) represents, I believe, a valuable complement to character education efforts. Such exercises give students the opportunity to practice making decisions that result in exhibiting the sort of characteristics that character education seeks to highlight. Moreover, such exercises provide the basis for students to develop an understanding the role of princples in moral reasoning. Since these principles, when presented according to a traditional academic model, can be extremely difficult to assimilate, it behooves us to explore alternative modes of presentation. These games and exercises enable students to generate the principles by themselves, from the inside-out, and in so doing, achieve a familiarity and dexterity

with them that otherwise, would be unavailable. For this reason, not to mention the fun in the classroom that usually results, we should continue to explore such exercises—and the overall role of principles in moral reasoning—as a vital counterpart to ongoing character education practices.